Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 19: Storytelling

Guests: Cuquis Robledo and Emily Ladau

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey there! Welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong.

Today's episode is about storytelling with my two guests Cuquis Robledo and Emily Ladau. Both Cuquis and Emily work at Rooted in Rights, a media organization that produces videos and social media campaigns exclusively on disability rights issues. Emily is the Editor-in-Chief of the Rooted in Rights blog, and Cuquis is the coordinator for their Storyteller Series.

Cuquis and Emily will share what it takes to make a good story, ways storytellers can engage an audience effectively, and why authentic and accessible disabled media is so important.

And by the way, full disclosure: I had two pieces published in the Rooted in Rights blog last year.

Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: Thank you both so much for joining me on the podcast today. Why don't you both introduce yourselves if you don't mind. Emily, do you wanna go first?

EMILY LADAU: Sure. Hi. So, my name is Emily Ladau, and I wear a fair number of hats. But today, I am wearing the hat of Editor in Chief of the Rooted in Rights blog, and I am really, really excited to be here.

ALICE: Great.

CUQUIS ROBLEDO: And hi, I'm Cuquis Robledo. I am the Coordinator for the Rooted in Rights Storytellers' Series, and this is actually my very first podcast. So, I'm also excited to be here. It's a new experience for me, so thank you, Alice, for inviting me to be on your podcast.

What do you think makes a great story?

ALICE: Well, it's a pleasure. And I think I've been a long-time admirer of Rooted in Rights, and I think all three of us are clearly lovers of storytelling. So, I wanna throw out this question first to both of you. It's kind of a broad question, but it's kind of something that I'm curious about. What do you think makes a good story?

EMILY: Well, since Cuquis is the official runner of the storyteller's program, Cuquis, do you wanna go first?

CUQUIS: Yeah, sure. So, what makes a good story? I mean, there are a lot of factors that go into making a really good story. What I do with our storytellers: So, first of all, I actually teach people with disabilities how to make their own advocacy videos. And one of the things I always tell my storytellers is probably the most important things when making their story or filming their story is having a really good idea and pitch in the mind. And I always ask our storytellers these five questions: 1) Obviously, what is your topic or idea? 2) Why is this topic important to you? Because we like our stories, I think a very good story has to be very personal because that way, it draws the audience in even more. It becomes a lot more relatable. Who is your audience? Because you know, different stories, a story can do in many, many directions depending on your audience. And then what is, obviously, your call to action? Because you want to have some sort of, even if it's not a resolution, but you wanna have some sort of, with our stories, we want our audience to kind of do something about the issue that is at hand. So, we always like to think about what is going to be the best call to action when it comes to telling your story.

So, I think those are kind of some big, key questions to ask yourself when you're coming up with a story. And not just any advocacy video, but any story in general. And also making it as personal as possible. I think that is very, very key because you want to be relatable to your audience. And also, I think the more relatable you are to your audience, I think the better your message is going to get across. So, those are kind of my tips based off of my experience with the Storytellers' Series that I've been working on and just in life, just by telling my own story as well, what I find works with most people and most audience members.

ALICE: Great. Thanks for that.

EMILY: Jumping off of that, a lot of what I do with the Rooted in Rights blog is relatively similar to what Cuquis does; however, we don't have quite as much of a structure just because we're not producing a video. We're producing a blog post. And so, while I follow those tips, I don't directly give them to writers because I really look for the writers to come to me with their own original ideas and then help shape the ideas into a story that resonates with the audience.

So, we have a slightly different pitching process, but very much along the same lines in terms of what we're looking to accomplish. And some of the best stories that we have had are the ones that people aren't necessarily talking about in the mainstream. And I think what makes a good story is when somebody can read that story and see themselves in it in some way and say, "This is what I've been trying to say, and I've been struggling to convey this message." Or, "I haven't been able to connect with other people who feel exactly the same way as me." Or, "I couldn't quite articulate it, but this story really speaks to me." And we've had that happen a lot with the blog posts.

I know there was a great blog post by Kings Floyd, who is an awesome advocate in the disability community. And she wrote a piece about being bullied by her paraprofessional when she was in public school. That's not something that's talked about a lot, but I know that before

we even put it out into the world, it resonated really deeply with me. Because it's something that I experienced too, but I hadn't necessarily connected with anybody on it. So, having the opportunity to put something out there that no one's really talking about, but as soon as everybody reads it, they say, "Yes! This story sound exactly like what I went through, and I'm so glad that somebody put words to it," that's a really powerful thing.

And I think that when it comes down to it, a good story is something that touches somebody in some way that they didn't realize they needed to hear.

[chill-out reggae]

CUQUIS: I know that most of our storytellers, it's the first time that they're speaking on camera, or that they're speaking out in public. But I do think that in the end, once they've had practice being on camera and just talking to a camera, it becomes more empowering for them. I know for me, when I first started doing videos, I was able to find my voice through that, and I felt more empowered. And I realized oh, wow, I didn't realize how this could be so effective. So, it's just, I think, nice to put the face to the name of that person that's telling the story. It just becomes a lot more real.

How do you work with the storytellers on their video narrative?

ALICE: And I'm guessing with video, obviously, the storytellers are recording a lot of footage. So, how do you work with various storytellers on editing their content and advising them on how to create their narrative?

CUQUIS: Yeah, no. Well, I normally do is, again, I always point out that always go back to why this issue is important to you. 'Cause sometimes, it's very easy to get lost in kind of the statistics of the issue that they're talking about. But I always tell them, "This is what's important about you being on camera is this is your chance for your personality to shine through. And don't be afraid. Don't shy away from, you know, it's fine if this content is serious. Obviously, that's one thing. But allowing yourself to kind of show that emotion when you're on camera." I always say that, "You should go for it. Be as emotional as you need to be for this piece. Be open about it. Let yourself be vulnerable in the situation. If the piece," because we've also had more humorous pieces too that we're starting to get, and "if you want to be a little silly, or if you wanna be more funny with it, then that's also a really good way to engage the audience. And if that's your personality, then definitely go for it."

Because at the end of the day, it's their video. It's kind of how they want their video to be shaped. I just kind of guide them and give them tips on maybe performance styles that, "Oh, make sure that you're not going inside of yourself and kind of shrinking back. Put your full self out there. Put your full self forward."

ALICE: And that speaks to the authenticity and the need for authentic disabled media.

CUQUIS: Exactly.

What are challenging to making videos accessible?

ALICE: What are some challenges in making the videos accessible for as many different disabilities as possible?

CUQUIS: Yeah. In terms of, well, what we do try to do is we always try to do Open Captions with the videos, especially when we put them on Facebook. We always do Closed Captioning as well, too, for YouTube. And also, we like to include Audio Descriptions as well. So, just

because we want to, not only we want to make obviously, the content as authentic as possible, we want it so that everyone can enjoy it as much as possible. And we also make sure that we include the transcript of the whole video on the platform, on our website, and also on YouTube. And we just wanna make sure that all the content is accessible as possible. It may take a little extra work, but honestly, it's worth it in the end. And I think at the end, we wanna try to make the content accessible; we want all people of all abilities to be able to see it. So, in the end, it's definitely worth it.

[bright music]

Emily's role as Editor in Chief

ALICE: So, Emily, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about your main responsibilities as Editor in Chief and how you enjoy this role.

EMILY: This is honestly one of the most rewarding things I have ever had the opportunity of doing. And I recently publicly told a story that initially I didn't even want to take on the role. Because I was worried that I would be inadequate at it or that I wouldn't do it justice. And I originally turned the role down, and then Jordan Melograna, who is our boss, the Creative Director, he turned around, came back, and said, "No, but really. You should do this." And so, I took it on a little over a year ago and haven't looked back since.

I think why I love it so much is because I really get to be behind the scenes in amplifying some really important stories that need to be told. And there are so many things that I have learned from the process of being an editor, both small things like remembering that everybody has their particular quirks and styles when it comes to writing, and then also bigger things like having writers pitch me topics that I had never even thought about. And being able to help them turn it into something that goes out into the world is really, really rewarding.

The other thing, too, is that I like that we are disability-specific and that we only publish writing from people who identify as having a disability. Because I think that it gives us—even just me on a personal level—a common bond with the people who I'm working with. But then, I also think that there's a stronger sense of community when we actually put pieces out there.

And we try not to just tell the same stories over and over. So, one thing that I'm working on right now that I imagine will actually be published by the time that this podcast goes live, is helping a gentleman who is currently incarcerated get his story out there. Because Rooted in Rights and our umbrella organization, Disability Rights Washington, we do work focused on advocacy for people with disabilities who are incarcerated. And so, having that translate over into the blog—because there's already been some film work done on that with one of our documentaries called "On the Outs"—now we're sort of taking it to the writing stages.

[mellow jazz]

And I don't think enough people are talking about the intersection between disability and incarceration. To even have the tiniest role in being able to learn from somebody directly about what their experiences are has been a challenging process in the most, I don't wanna say, rewarding. I don't want this to sound at all like I have any kind of savior complex about it. But it's just been a learning experience for me, and it's caused me to have to think about things in new ways and to step back and to not be at the forefront of telling other people's stories and really let them take the reins.

What stories or topics haven't been covered yet by Rooted in Rights?

ALICE: Rights has covered a lot of different subjects and issues. I am curious to both you and, Emily and Cuquis, what are some stories and topics that you think haven't been covered yet through videos or your blog that you would really like to see in the future?

EMILY: Well, I have been thinking about this a lot, and I think there are a couple of populations that we need to do a better job of working with, both in terms of people who identify as intellectually or cognitively disabled, and then also people who are either much younger or much older and have disabilities. So, those are two major populations who I feel like have been, so far, under-represented. And I imagine that that may be due to a lack of access to the Internet or a lack of support in providing a story. And so, I personally am making it my goal to try to refocus on that.

And then, of course, I want to focus on really amplifying the stories of people who have multiply-marginalized identities. So, right now, we definitely have a fair amount of stories from people who identify as such, but I think that we need to do a better job. And I think that we have the capacity to do it, but now it's a matter of just continuing to spread information about who we are and what we do and what role we can play. And then, letting other people know that we are here to support you in the telling of your story. So, I think that onus is definitely on us to continue focusing on communities that are not necessarily always at the forefront of this type of media.

How to pitch a blog post

ALICE: Thank you. So, if people wanna pitch a story, either for the blog post or the video Storyteller Series, how can they get involved, and who should they contact? So, I'll go with Emily first.

EMILY: Sure. So, there are a couple ways to go about pitching a blog. But my preferred method, just for the sake of staying organized so that I can keep track of everyone's stories, is having people go to our website. And then, you can click from the dropdown menu, "Blog," and then, the first option is, "Submit a blog idea." And that will bring you to the Submit a blog idea page, and then there's a form that you can fill out that tells me a little bit about what you're pitching. You can send an idea, you can send a draft, you can tell me whether or not it's time sensitive, you can send your idea, or you can send the actual text of a draft. And then, you can also upload it as a Word document if you prefer. But if for any reason the form is not accessible, then people can email me at EmilyL@RootedinRights.org. So, I get pitches both ways.

The most important thing, really, is to be as specific as possible when submitting your pitches. And also, unfortunately, to know that we don't respond to every single pitch that we get, as much as I would love to. Right now, we respond to the pitches that we are accepting for publication or at least accepting a draft to be sent to us for consideration. So, it is a process in the same way that pitching to any other mainstream publication is a process. But it is pretty easy to get ahold of me if you have any questions or want to submit an idea.

Giving thanks to the whole team

ALICE: Is there anything else you'd like to share about storytelling in general or anything about your work at RIR?

EMILY: Yes, and I only regret that I waited until so far in to do this. But I really wanna shout out the rest of the people that we work with. We are a small team, but I really think we're an awesome team. I know how biased I am here, but everybody on the team right now is incredible and so dedicated to what they do. I mean, there are literal squad goals. They're so awesome.

And I'm just really lucky to work with all of them, and I hope that they all listen to the end so that they can hear this. Because without the team, the entire team, none of any of this would even be remotely possible. We all are lucky to have each other.

CUQUIS: I echo that as well. Yeah, we have an amazing, amazing team. I mean, we have a great Creative Director. We have now two great Creative Production Assistants that are awesome. They put in like 110% into everything. And we have one really, really, really incredible and talented Lead Editor and Motion Graphics Designer. He's like the best of the best. Oh my gosh. And he kind of is the one that puts the glue on everything and holds it all together. He's the one that just kind of makes all that magic happen. And we have a great Creative Production Intern, our great Digital Manager. I mean, it's an amazing team.

When I first started two years ago, it was small. It was very small. For me, it has grown. I know Emily, you've been here only a year. But when I was here, it was really small. There were maybe like four, five people on the team. And it's grown so much but in a really, really, really good way.

And it's kind of cool to see how the original Rooted in Rights, when I started, it was only like six months old. It was a baby. And now, it's over two years, and the Storyteller Series is now over one year old. Actually, in March of next year, it's probably gonna hit two years. And it's just incredible to think how it all happened, and it all just happened because I, after my intern two years ago with Rooted in Rights, I wanted to keep making videos while I was at school. And Jordan said, "Cuquis, why don't you film something about this topic? Or film whatever you want, and we'll make a video out of it."

And so, I used a dinky Canon digital camera to film my video on Little People and employment. And then Jordan realized, and we realized, oh, if I could do this from remotely and far away, other people can do this. And other people can have the opportunity to be empowered like I was to share their authentic stories like I did. And it's possible to do it from anywhere you are. So, the fact that it started with just me, and then it grew to Emily, and then it grew to Mizuki, and then Jensen, and then oh my gosh, so many other people that we've had. We've had over 10 storytellers now. It's incredible to see how far we've come, and how I'm so glad that we're still growing.

There's always room for improvement. We're always improving how we function, how we do production. It's always a learning process, but I'm in for the ride. I'm so glad that I'm in it and that I'm on it and that I can be a part of it.

ALICE: Well, thank you both so much. I just wanna say I appreciate you both.

[hip hop]

Wrap-up

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes including text transcripts are available at https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byyeeeeeee!

♪ cat walk, colfax, wax on ♪

♪ hoe strut, pole dance, romance, hat's off ♪

♪ knees up, toes down, lets dance ♪

♪ how far will they go? ♪

♪ Oh yeah ♪

♪ how far will they go? ♪

♪ oh yeah ♪